

INTRODUCTION

In November of 1998, the King County Council passed a budget proviso which mandated that Public Health - Seattle & King County craft a strategic scope of work for the next five years. The proviso also mandated that Public Health obtain and incorporate input from key health system representatives about the proposed scope of work (see Appendix J for a transcript of the Public Health Stakeholders' Forum).

Strategic Direction: A Guide to Public Health Programs Over the Next 5 Years is the result of those

mandates. Since public health practice is unique and complex, this document has been designed as a portal or gateway to understanding the public health system. It also describes Public Health's best forecast of policy and budget issues likely to arise during the next five years.

Local public health departments are key parts of the public health system which include local, state and federal agencies as well as their private partners working around the clock to protect communities from harmful conditions and promote healthy behaviors. Public health is essential, and it is a bargain; however, it is often invisible. People cannot see disease outbreaks, injuries, or early deaths that do not occur.

In contrast to the medical care system, which helps one individual at a time, public health helps entire communities. This "population-based" approach using a "Determinants of Health" model reaches large groups of people by preventing health problems before they manifest. In addition, public health plays a key role as a Safety Net provider, assuring health services to vulnerable and high risk populations.

Nationwide, population-based public health services amount to only 1% of the trillion dollars spent annually for health care, but this small share is a remarkably cost-effective investment for health. Public health shifts resources from problems to prevention, "going upstream" to get to the source of problems. By preventing the high costs to society that come from epidemics, polluted water systems, and other health risks, the public health system saves resources every year in health care and social costs.

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and it is a bargain.**

Much is being accomplished in King County, but serious challenges remain. Public Health - Seattle & King County's key priorities for the next five years will involve addressing the following:

- Promoting better health and wellness for the entire population of King County;
- The emergence of infectious diseases including resistant strains of common diseases;
- Increasing rates of chronic disease in our aging population;
- The increasing need for primary medical and dental health services for high risk, low-income, and/or un- or underinsured people, many of whom do not speak English; and
- Managing a changing revenue base with service provision based increasingly on acquisition of outside revenue. Public Health must aggressively capture reimbursements and grant funds in order to provide needed services.

Perhaps more so than at any time in history, the public health system is facing unprecedented challenges and opportunities. Public Health - Seattle & King County is embracing both opportunities and challenges in order to improve

markedly the health status of King County residents and to realize our vision of “healthy people and healthy communities” everywhere in King County.
